

ON HORSEBACK



Park fixture this weekend

THE FIRST polo game of this year's Irish season was played on Sunday last, when three teams competed for the President's Cup in the Phoenix Park. The Ratoath team won by one goal with Lar Sheeran as captain. His team members were Tony Rhatigan, Lord James Beresford and the Argentinian Ricardo Eduardo. Football hero Ronnie Whelan shares a name with a member of the A.I.P.C. There were plenty of quips about it at the club when Whelan scored our goal against the Soviet Union. The next major tournament on the A.I.P.C.'s calendar is this weekend's Derby and, in August, the Dublin Horse Show International Tournament. The season ends with a four-day tournament in September. On Millennium Day at the Phoenix Park (July 10), we'll have a chance to see polo as it was in the days of the Raj—members will dress in period costumes.

fast canter to an even faster one with many sharp and sudden turns. My task was to ride close beside the other horse, as if I was marking an opponent. It was like riding a March hare.

Chukkers

"If you came to me for training, three times a week, I'd have you playing chukkers (seven-minute sections) in three weeks," was Lar's verdict. I was amazed I hadn't fallen.

Lar coaches friends at polo but stresses he is not a professional instructor. "If someone needs practice, I help them. Everytime they miss a ball, I make them buy me a brandy — last week, I was stocious!"

Next, I was given Mercedes, a sleek black Argentinian mare, and a mallet. My arm was aching after the weight of the mallet but the biggest problem was hitting the ball — eventually I did, but it didn't travel far at first.

Faster

There are only three women players in the A.I.P.C. "We're playing against men, but women can ride faster because they're lighter," says Christine Darmanin-Sheehan. Her first husband, Alfredo Darmanin, was an international polo player.

All poloists agree it's rough. Bad injuries to horses are rare — hitting a horse's legs with a stick is a serious foul and could break the legs. But players are occasionally injured.

Broken collarbones and wrists are not unknown.

I was told it was good for releasing "natural aggression" but somehow I couldn't imagine "polo hooligans".

A helmet is worn for safety, with brown leather boots, knee-pads, gloves, white cotton jodhpurs and a shirt or jumper in the team colour. The lot can cost about £500.

Galloping

Each team has four players. Horses are changed every seven minutes and the game lasts 45 minutes. The start of a match is a bit like a rugby scrum but livelier, as the first "chukker" begins with a flurry of galloping hooves and waving sticks.

Players can bump into each other provided the angle is slight and the pace not too fast. There is a handicap system, from one to ten. Lord Waterford has the highest handicap in the A.I.P.C. In Britain, his son, Charles, is rated at 6. There are only five players in the world with a handicap of 10.

Left-handed polo players don't have an advantage, they must learn to play right-handed!

Alex Mackay has been playing polo for 25 years and is the club's longest-playing member.

Horses can get hooked too. "I had a horse called Apache who didn't want to retire," says Alex. "I retired him when he was 17 years old but he got very sick and the vet said he was pining for the game! Now he's 21 and still playing."



break from the action in the Phoenix Cup at the Phoenix Park.

Pictures: FRANK MILLAR

med m in ol in ol in five- star hotel. It's a holiday — you're paying for the taxi as well as the riding and accommodation. Not having the car settled for a quick for- tion to polo at the club. First I mounted Santa Fe, a glossy chestnut mare from Argentina, owned by polo manager Lar Sheeran. The stirrup-leathers are worn

long like a cowboy's. The left hand holds both reins and crop (a harmless whip which is even less harm when it's held in a weak hand!). The right hand

carries the mallet but I had to learn to manoeuvre the pony first.

Lar's daughter, Tina, went through the paces with me. The pace varied from a